ANIMA CELTICA

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BY

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TO

MRS. FRANK PYMAN

Bronntanas beag, mar chúitiughadh ar thabhartas thar luach.

APOLOGIA

J'ay seulement faict icy un amas de fleurs estrangeres, n'y ayant fourny du mien que le filet à les joindre.

. . . . . .

Feci quod potui, faciant meliora potentes.

ANIMA CELTICA

I

THE title of this little book was chosen rather for its shortness and suggestiveness than for any other merit it might have; it should be excused from too literal an acceptance. It would of course be sheer arrogance to pretend, within the purview of an essay such as this, to disclose the spirit of the Celtic peoples. As they themselves said long ago of one of their fairest queens, "If a hundred clerks were gathered together they could not write down a half of her ways," and, to use the still more extravagant words of Oisin, "If all the sea were ink, and all the feathers of the birds of the air were pens, all the green earth paper, and all the sons and daughters of Eve were writers, it would be impossible for them" to tell even a tenth part of all the valour, virtues, and sufferings of the Gael. Indeed the title is more bold than to some readers it may seem. It comprehends nothing less than the social and literary history

of Scandinavia, Brittany, Cornwall, Wales, some of the Western Isles of Scotland, the Isle of Man, and finally the hapless country of Ireland

> "the lovely and the lonely Bride
> Whom we have wedded but have never won." (1)

To compass the study of these several branches of the Celtic stock in a work of this size would require for its conception a mental recklessness that the author does not possess, and, for the success of its carrying out, more than the wisdom of angels. One is bound in such a case to take a bold line and to set apart one member of this great family to serve as a type of the whole, and this may be done with more reason because the Celtic race has, by the especial aloofness and shyness of its spirit, lost in a less measure than any other race by the separation of its children. They have gone far apart and suffered many different chances and changes in the vicissitudes of things, but they have never wavered in the love of their common mother, nor loosed themselves from her influences; and all that they have had to endure through the devouring years has not been able to dim the clear memory of their early home.

It is the Irish people we will prefer as this type. It is their mind, their essential character, we will attempt to fix (if one may fix a thing so elusive, so intangible), that it may serve us as a mirror in which to behold something of the delicate grace, the

mystery, and the strangeness of beauty that lie hidden from the common view in the soul of the Celt—the Anima Celtica. And we will write mainly with the thought of the early days in our mind, for the soul of a people may be traced best of all in its beginning, when the impulse of life and expansion is strong within, and before the influences of other peoples have been able to change its course or mould it to the general likeness of mankind. By prolonged misfortune Ireland has been brought almost to the verge of ruin, losing one after another those precious gifts which once made her renowned through Europe. It is not fair to judge an ancient race like this in the cold light of modern history, or to point to a "remnant under sorrow," as all that this people could produce. Moreover it is too sadly evident, in these latter days, that the commercial spirit has insinuated itself into Ireland from the further west, and that the people are forsaking their birthright to follow after the doubtful gains of merchandise and political intrigue. But this is not an inherited or even a stable element in their nature, and it is only of such that we propose to write.

Now the very last thing that one finds in dealing with such a theme is what to set down at the beginning. There is no beginning, nor any end, in the maze and tangle of things Irish. And it may be that the only wisdom is to plunge "in medias res," to gather and bind together the stray scattered threads

of truth here and there, to cleanse them from our prejudice and clear them from our bewilderment of thought, and finally to weave of them a likeness which will be unmistakeable by the very force of its simplicity.

There is perhaps nothing so difficult as the delineation of character. Mr. Gladstone has well said that "The shades of the rainbow are not so nice, and the sands of the seashore are not such a multitude, as are all the subtle, shifting, blinding forms of thought and of circumstance that go to determine the character of men and their acts,"—and if these words are a little extravagant in measuring the solidity of the Saxon mind, they do most truly represent the fluid, quick, eager spirit of the Celtic race. In the Irish people we meet with a character so complex that it well nigh baffles our analysis. It may be said of them that, when they think, it is with the firm, commanding intellect of men; when they suffer, it is with the acute, sensitive nature of women; when they act, it is at random with the caprice and inconsequence of children. Their emotions are changeful as the wind, hovering always between a smile and a sigh. They have minds as variable and versatile as that of Brian Macnamee, bard to Henry O'Neill in the 15th century, of whom the Annals of Ulster say that "he was illustrious for hospitality, and for that he most bought of poetry and did most of border raids that was in his time." (2) A man in his lifetime plays many parts, but it is only the Celt who can do

so without a seeming strangeness and without ringing down the curtain between whiles. "The same man who will to-day be dancing, sporting, drinking, and shouting, will be soliloquising by himself to-morrow, heavy, and sick, and sad, in his own little hut, making a croon over departed hopes, lost life, and the vanity of this world, and the coming of death." (3)

Now it should be said here that even out of the soul of this people ("wavering among intuition, ignorances, half-truths, shadows of falsehood, now audacious, now hesitating, blown hither and thither by conflicting winds, a prey to the indefinite") (4) there do emerge for our study certain leading characteristics, key-notes of themes which in their development may reveal to us the truth and the similitude of the Celtic mind.

II

1 Of those leading characteristics the most outstanding to the writer's view is the passion that the Irish have always had for war and wandering, and the wild hazardous ways of life. In the soft securities of life they have found no abiding charm, nor have they known by still waters to pass in quietness their tranquil days. For them, rather, as Children of Tempest, the full fury of the gale and the buffets of the immeasurable sea. It may be said, with an Irish twist of phrase, that these people are never at peace except when they are at war. Their annals are one unvaried record of bloodshed. Their history may be told in that same terrible line with which Verhaeren sums up the story of the Egyptian Dynasties. "Aubes de sang, soirs de flamme, nuits de desastre." (5.) It has been said in explanation of this that their pugnacity springs from two main causes, the survival of primitive ways in this end of the earth, and the strange peace that broods over the hills. They have a saying still in the west, "It is better to be quarrelsome than lonesome." This has

been their maxim, and they have fought and become riotous whenever the unnatural loneliness of their land has been beyond their endurance.

Of their courage there has never been any question. It is pleasant, after reading the many bitter things said by Spenser in his "View of the state of Ireland," to come upon his testimony to the valour of the men he has hated so well. "They are very valiante and hardye, for the most part great endurours of cold, labour, hunger and all hardiness, very active and stronge of hand, very swift of foote, very vigilaunte and circumspect in theyr enterprises, very present in perrils, very great scorners of death" . . . . . and again "I have heard some greate warriors say that in all the services which they had seen abroad in forrayne countreys they never saw a more comely horseman than the Irishman, nor that cometh on more bravely in his charge." (6)

But we need not rely on Spenser's word alone for the proof of these things. The fame of the Celtic peoples for bravery had been won more than a thousand years before his time. Greece, Rome, and Central Europe had bowed the knee before the power of their armies. And even in outlying countries like Ireland their children proved themselves worthy of the parent stock, and maintained the old traditions of daring and invincible courage in war. They fought desperately, and with no care of life,

because it was noble to die in battle and a shame upon them to go back from any fight. "A man," said the warrior Goll, "lives after this life but not after his honour." And for them, before Patrick came, the life after death was not in a gloomy underworld like that of the Greeks, but feasting and making glad with women, and with feats of arms in the shining palaces of the Ever-Living Ones. And so they went out recklessly to battle, and, if need be, to death; yet before rushing upon their foes they would not forget to stoop down and kiss their ancient mother the earth in farewell. It was a tribute of love to her on whose bosom they might soon be resting, a last thanksgiving to her who had given them days of joy under the light of the sun, and made them swift and strong for fight. To this impulsive bravery they added a careful training in the science of war which saved them from throwing their lives away. Indeed they gave more praise to skill in arms than to actual prowess of body. Those warriors were most esteemed who knew the craft of sword play, and the deft handling of shields in defence, and the felicitious casting of the sling and the spear. They had a world fame for these things, and in the pages of their annals they loved to dwell upon this quality of cleverness and the feats that were wrought by it in battle or in the chase. Among the exploits of Cuchulain, when by his own might he held Ulster against the hosts of Connacht, were the three slings he made from a

great distance to put terror into the heart of Queen Maeve, of which the first killed her little dog Baiscne, the second, the squirrel by her side, and the third, the tame bird perching on her shoulder. Then, too, there is the story of Naisi playing chess with Deirdre in the House of the Red Branch, the hour before his death, and the way he made a fair throw with a man of the chessmen over his shoulder and put out the eye of Conchobar's messenger spying at them from the high window. And again there are the tales told about Diarmuid and the men he slew with his golden apple of magic, which would hit anything he aimed at and return to his hand again. In very truth these heroes of the Gael, with their dexterity and fatal precision, are as wonderful in their way as those seven hundred chosen warriors of Gibeah, referred to in the book of Judges, who could fight with left and right hand alike, and who flung their sling stones with such aim that they could hit even a hair and not miss by the stone's going on either side. The lapse of time and the kindling imaginations of the bards have thrown a mythical greatness about these warriors of early Ireland, and it is hard now to separate the truth from the mass of fable in which it is enclosed, It seems an unreal, almost supernatural world, in which they lived and waged their wars. They themselves are only half-human, and will often be found calling in the earth gods and the elements to their

aid. "The thick of a wave, or the deep of the sea," or a druid mist will come between them as they fight, or perhaps one of the Gods will throw his cloak of illusion about a chosen hero, as the Greek Gods used to do, and carry him out of the battle. And we read of one warrior who prevailed by reason of his ugliness alone, which exceeded that of any devil, and of another whom no one touched with a spear because of his amazing beauty, "for all thought he was a ministering angel." There is something stupendous also in the battle frenzy or rage which seizes upon them. Cuchulain used to become distorted and swell to double his accustomed size. Every limb quivered like a bulrush in a running stream. The beats of his heart sounded like the roaring of a lion as he rushed upon his prey. A light blazed above his head, and "his hair became tangled about as it had been the branches of a red thorn-bush stuffed into the gap of a fence." And when he fought his greatest fight, with Ferdia at the ford, we are told that, while the two were interlocked in close combat, the demons and goblins and unearthly things of the glens screamed from the edges of their swords, and the waters recoiled in terror from them, so that they fought on dry land in the midst of the river-bed.

III

THERE are many legends one meets with in Irish literature which throw a sidelight upon the genius for war and the love of fighting that is inborn in the race. Geraldus Cambrensis relates that when they christened their sons they left the right arm unbaptised, that it might be pagan and so the fitter for battle. And the Roman geographer Solinus, writing in the 3rd century after Christ, says that Irish mothers were wont to present the first solid food to their male infants on the point of the sword, as it were to dedicate them to war from their earliest days.

There is frequent mention, too, of the worship by warriors of their war weapons, and the saying of prayers and charms to them, "that they might have the better success in bataille," and of the relating by the swords themselves, when unsheathed, of the deeds that had been wrought by them. Some of the spears of the heroes of the Red Branch, and other mythical champions, are described in the legends as terrible and mysterious weapons. The spear of Keltar of the Battles twisted and writhed in the hand of the warrior who bore it, striving to make for the victim whose blood was ready for spilling.

And other spears were regularly seized with a rage for massacre, and often the bronze head grew red-hot, so that it had to be kept near a cauldron of cold water, into which it was plunged whenever it blazed up with the murder fit. (7)

It was believed, too, that the shields of kings and great commanders, when their bearers were hard pressed in battle, gave forth a loud melancholy moan, which was heard all over Ireland, and taken up and continued by the shields of other heroes, and further prolonged by the roaring of the Three Waves of Erin in sympathy. And in the same way the Lia Fail, or stone of destiny, would roar under the feet of every king who was fated to be supreme in Ireland. Even when "death's ungentle buffet" came upon these warriors in life's last battle, their hands refused to fall apart into forgetfulness, nor did any sleep come upon their swords. There is clear evidence, from the opening of the royal tombs, to prove that the bodies of kings and chieftains were often buried in standing position, arrayed in full armour, with their faces turned towards the territories of their enemies.

It was no doubt this passion for war and love of personal glory which led the Irish people astray. They fought too valiantly to fight well. To suffer leadership, or go shoulder to shoulder with other fighting men, were things their proud natures would not endure. They demanded the open battle, and

freedom to win with their own right hands a name that should go down in the songs of the bards to the last end of the world. Had they been men of less individual prowess, they might have banded themselves together, and shewn a firm front and closed ranks in time of invasion. These centuries of pitiful decay might have been centuries of construction. Ireland might have consolidated itself into one great nation, equal to that of its enemy across the sea. But these are vain regrets. These "might have beens" only add to the bitterness of the truth. The tale itself is a far different one, and the tale has been told. The moral of Irish History is simply this, that the jealousy of warriors, and the constant struggle of separate tribes for supremacy, is death to the cause of unity, that a nation divided against itself can never stand.

There was a time when this people saw for itself the folly of each man amongst them fighting for his own hand. It does not seem to be known by whose thought it was, but somewhere between the reigns of Conn of the Hundred Battles, High King of Ireland in 123 A.D., and that of his grandson Cormac MacArt, the renowned company of the Fianna were founded for the good order and defence of Ireland. They were not merely an idle pleasure-loving troop of hunters, as some have imagined; theirs was a brave attempt to quell the turmoil of their beloved country, and to protect her against the marauding

invasions of the strangers from oversea. They were continually making the circuit of Ireland, and wherever they passed there was peace. When Fionn MacCumhal came to be their captain, their star rose to its height. Under his leadership they were invincible. They would follow him anywhere, knowing well that, with him, they were sure at least of some honourable way to death. In that they were not mistaken, for it is said that only four of them died like ordinary men, peacefully, in their beds. It is good and stirring to the heart to read in the Irish books the story of all their might, the fame that they won in battle, and the staunch fellowship which was between them to the end. Who would not have gone down gladly to the edge of death with such a herochief as Fionn, "of the large and liberal soul of bounty: exceeding all his countrymen in the prowess and accomplishments of a warrior, King of mild majesty and numerous bards? The ever open house of kindness was his heart; the seat of undaunted courage. Great was the chief of the mighty Fianna. Fionn of the perfect soul, the consummate wisdom, whose knowledge penetrated events and pierced through the veil of futurity. Fionn of the splendid and ever-during glories. Bright were his blue-rolling eyes, and his hair like flowing gold. Lovely were the charms of his unaltering beauty, and his cheeks like the glowing rose." (8) It was no ordinary man Fionn would welcome into the ranks of the

Fianna. They must be warriors of true heart, and strong in the arm, and keepers of their word: he would not have a man whose weapon quivered in his hand. He required beforehand that a candidate for admission should take the oath of his country "by the sun, and the wind, and the moon," to give obedience to his command, to offer violence to no woman, to take a wife for her virtue and beauty, without thought of any fortune she might have, and to give service to the poor. And the following are some further qualifications that a candidate must have.

That he (the candidate) would not refuse to fight with nine men of any other nation who should challenge or set upon him.

That he should be well acquainted with the twelve books of poetry, and be able to compose verses.

That, when he ran through a wood in chase, his hair should continue bound up—if it fell down he could not be received.

That he must be so swift and light of foot as not to break a rotten stick by standing on it.

That he must be able to leap over a tree as high as his forehead and to stoop under a tree that was lower than his knees.

That he should be able, without stopping, or lessening his speed, to draw a thorn out of his foot.

We are at liberty to believe or disbelieve these hero-feats according as we please, but it should be said that Keating himself, the historian of the Fianna,

has no shadow of doubt that what he wrote was the truth. He goes on gravely to say that, "So long as these terms of admission were exactly insisted upon, the militia of Ireland were an invincible defence to their country, and a terror to rebels at home and enemies abroad."

It was a grievous day for Ireland when the flower of the Fianna perished in the field of Gabhra,—and there was never a greater battle fought in Ireland than that one. Wonderful deeds were done on both sides, and the slaughter was such that only old men and boys, it is said, were left in Erin after the fight. It was Osgur who led the Fianna that day, like a wild sea horse on the tides of war. He cut a path for himself three times through the ranks of the foe, and slew five score of the sons of the Gael, and five score fighting men from the country of Snow, and seven score of the men of Green Swords, that never went a step backward, and four hundred from the country of the Lion, and five score of the sons of kings, and the High King himself before he, too, fell, "slain by the spear of the seven spells." The carnage was so terrible that it mighte well seem as if the ruin of the world were at hand. Even Osgur, whose heart was "like a twisted thorn with a sheath of steel upon it," could not refrain from tears, and Fionn, coming to the aid of his band of heroes when it was too late, turned his face away and cried also. And he made this lament over Osgur, as he lay dying:

"Child of my child, calf of my calf, white and slender, it is a pity the way you are. And my heart is starting like a deer—and I am weak after you and after the Fianna of Ireland. Misfortune has followed us, and farewell now to battles and to a great name, and farewell to taking tributes; for every good thing I ever had is gone from me now." As for Fionn himself, it is said that, when his time came, he died performing his hero leap. Yet there are some who say that Fionn and his companions never saw death, but lie spell-bound in an enchanted cave, and that the day will come when the battle-horn of Fionn shall be sounded three times, and at the sound of it the Fianna will rise up, as strong and fair as ever, to redeem their land from tyranny and wrong.

IV

2 ANOTHER leading theme which calls for development in any study of the Celtic Mind is that of its melancholy.

It is the melancholy of men who have a passion for intellectual and visible beauty, who have grown weary with the travail of ideas, and the long, vain pursuit after the white hounds of immortality.

It is the melancholy of dreamers and visionaries, and of men like Mohammed's successor whom God has loved, but not suffered to attain to anything.

It is the melancholy of those who have "loved the future like a mistress, and the future has mixed her breath with their breath, and shaken her hair about them, and hidden them from the understanding of their times." (9)

It is the melancholy of an utter despair, of men who have failed in the world, who have had to learn always the same long lesson of submission to an overmastering fate.

The remembrance and the understanding of this spirit of melancholy is vital to the knowledge of the

Irish nature, and indeed of that of the whole of the Celtic family. It is one of the things the most deeply grained into their character, and provides the surest explanation of that shyness and aloofness to which we have already referred, and which divides them so singularly from the other races of Europe. It appears everywhere throughout the whole range of their life, and tinges all of it with an atmosphere of gloom.

In the realm of War, though, like the race from which they sprang, they "dared beyond their strength and hazarded beyond their judgment, and in extremities were of an excellent hope" (10), it has nevertheless to be said of them by Oisin, "They went forth to the battle but they always fell." And in the ways of the world and the affairs of men they have not been more fortunate. There has never been in the civilised world a race of men with so little of the commercial instinct, or business judgment and balance. For these matters, which they would agree with the clerics in calling "ignominia seculi," and with Hamlet in thinking "the trivial game of life," they have been hopelessly unfitted by the framing and moulding of their mind. The spirit of Fionn of the generous hands is still strong upon his descendants. They, too, will give away "gold as if it were the leaves of the woodland, and silver as if it were the foam of the sea."

Ernest Renan, whose writings are perhaps the

truest expression in modern literature of the Celtic mind, has told us in that intimate revelation of himself in which his memory is enshrined (11), that he has always possessed the sentiment of the infinite and the eternal in life, and from that view and outlook has smiled upon the things that are temporal. And he, when he comes to speak of his brother Celts, and of the way in which they have steadily gone down in the world, says of them, "Never, since the beginning of Time, has any people hurried to ruin more impetuously, more imaginatively, more lightly." Their fluid, unstable temperament has carried them downwards as in a flood. "They have lived in a world where anything might flow and change and become any other thing, and among great gods whose passions are in the flaming sunsets and in the thunder and the thunder shower." (12) Our strait limits of life, and our thoughts of weight and measure, are things which have passed their understanding. Their treasures and their hearts are hidden in the kingdoms of faery, where we cannot go, and, as one of their poets says, they "would not, for the kingdom of the whole world, give up even one night of the nights of the Sidhe."

V

And again, in the kingdom of Love, the strain of melancholy intrudes, and there are for these men and women more sighs than smiles, more woes than benedictions. Let us set down here two verses from the Irish, put into English by Dr. Douglas Hyde, to illustrate what we have just written :—

> " Woe who once has seen her please
> And then sees her not each hour:
> Woe for him her love-mesh traps;
> Woe for him who snaps its power.
>
> Woe for him who sees her not:
> Woe his lot who does, I wis!
> Woe for him is not beside her;
> Woe besides for him who is."

If the literature of a people may be taken as a fair presentment of their outlook on life, and their experience of it, then love is indeed for the Irish,

> " a thwart sea wind full of rain and foam " (13)

and

> " The love of all under the light of the sun
> Is but brief longing, and deceiving hope
> And bodily tenderness." (14)

As I have read through their song books and found in their love lyrics all the sadness and lament of elegies, there has surged into my mind again and

again that refrain from the French, which has in it all the inconsolable sorrow of the "abbreviation of time and the failure of hope" and the frailty of human affection,

> "Plaisir d'amour ne dure qu'un moment:
> Chagrin d'amour dure toute la vie."

The coming of love, which should be the perfecting and consummation of a life, and the supreme happiness of it, seems to bring to the Irish no consolation or gladness, but rather to intensify for them the bitterness of "earth's old and weary cry." "It is," as Ailell said to Etain the Fair, for whose forbidden love he was wasting away to death, "It is love given to an echo, the spending of grief on a wave, a lonely fight with a shadow; that is what my love and my desire have been to me." "When," as is certainly the case with the children of Erin, "a soul gives itself absolutely to love, all the barriers of the world are burnt away and all its wisdom and subtlety are, as incense poured on a flame." (15) It is this ruin waiting for them hand in hand with love, and also the strain of seeking in mortal images the likeness of what is perhaps immortal, that throws a heaviness into their hearts when they should be most free from care, that makes it impossible for them ever to know what it is to "throw the pearl of their soul into a cup of wine or go down the primrose path of life to the sound of flutes." (16)

Later, in this essay, we shall trace the foot prints of melancholy in the paths of Irish literature too. Its stamp is everywhere in those "Celtic myths and legends, where the loveliness of the world is shewn through a mist of tears, and the life of a man is no more than the life of a flower." (17)

One might indeed go further and affirm that it was their bitterness of soul sorrow which gave the chief impulse to their song, and drove them to that deep communion with Madonna Natura which is reflected in all their literary work. It has been with them as it was with the other nations before their time. Out of the ruins of a memorable past there has sprung the creative flower of beauty: fate has given them gifts of fairer kind than those she took away. The glory of its youth has passed too soon from Ireland: the people once so strong have gone down early to their grave. Yet their spirit lingers like an everlasting enchantment about the hills and valleys of their beloved country: and the glory that they lost is but added to the loveliness of earth. Nor is this beauty lavished in vain. There are poets left in Erin, whose eyes can pierce the mysteries of earth, whose delicate hands have skill to fix the fiery steeds of vision to the golden chariot of faultless words. By them, the pain and suffering of long ago is distilled into the pure essence of beauty, and the dirge of a fallen nation is wrought worthily out of that nobler poetry which is born of sorrow.

VI

At the beginning of this section we defined the Celtic Melancholy to be the melancholy of an utter despair, of men who had failed in the world, who had had to learn always the same long lesson of submission to an overmastering fate. This cannot be better illustrated than by the history of Ireland itself as a nation—by the record of its varying fortunes, or, shall we not rather say, the unvarying record of its ill-fortune. There is no profit in dwelling continually on the misrule of the English in Ireland, or the long tragedy of this country's downfall. But one cannot easily be silent, remembering the overthrow, by the Norman invasions, of the fair and mature civilisation that was in Ireland from the 7th to the 12th centuries, and the extinguishment, at a later time, of the afterglow of the Renaissance in Ireland, by the tyrannies and oppression of the Tudors.

This country, as Thomas Davis reminded his brother Irishmen, "is no sandbank thrown up by some recent caprice of earth. It is an ancient land, honoured in the archives of civilisation, traceable into antiquity by its piety, its valour, and its sufferings. Every great European race has sent its

stream to the river of Irish mind. Long wars, vast organisations, subtle codes, beacon crimes, leading virtues, and self-mighty men were here." And it was this people, proud offspring of so noble a lineage, that the English, by a fatal policy, attempted to drive into submission by outrage, and massacre, and murder.

There are some almost unbelievable things in the state papers of the 16th century, and in the chronicles of that same period, which throw a keen light upon the understanding that the English had of the Irish of those days. They refer to them as a "people ready to go headlong to the Devil, if England seek not speedy remedy to prevent the same." They call upon God "with the beams of His grace to clarify the eyes of that rude people, that at length they may see their miserable estate." They record that it was from very boyhood that Henry VIII., in his "royal appetite," had determined to reduce the realm of Ireland "to knowledge of God and obedience of Us," and by conquest to cure "all the disease and infirmity of all this land, and bring the wild Irish into civilisation, and introduce for the first time tranquility and restfulness, wealth and prosperity, to a savage people." Erasmus takes it upon himself to place the Irish in learning and manner of life upon a level with the Turks and Saracens, and expresses the wish that the Epistles of St. Paul may be translated if only for the sake of

their enlightenment. And even the saintly Hooker can say no better thing of this race than the following: "This wicked, effrenated, barbarous, and unfaithful nation who, as Cambrensis writeth of them, they are a wicked and perverse generation, constant always in that they be always inconstant, faithful in that they be always unfaithful, and trusting in that they be always treacherous and untrusty. . . . They do nothing but imagine mischief, and have no delight in any good thing. God is not known in their land, neither is His name rightly called upon among them."

It seems to give an absolute pain to these old writers to have to speak anything praiseworthy of these wild Irish. When they are forced in spite of themselves to write without blame, they add frequently for the comfort of their souls some such qualification as this, from the same Cambrensis whom we have already quoted: "No man can be so inveterately attached to vice, as not to break its chains occasionally and perform some virtuous action."

The English of the age of Shakespeare, applying the words of their master to the consideration of "the meere Irish," agreed that the ills that these men did, invariably lived after them, while the good (which by the way they denied them to possess) was oft interred with their bones. And that was surely a pity. For, by a curious irony, it seems that in

their bones rested the sole virtue of this abandoned race, and that only when they were dead could any good be made of them. It is written, in some of the early herbals, that the human skull, being made into fine powder, is an effectual remedy against many diseases of the body, and one of them goes on to say, "the scull of a man ought to be of such an one which dieth a violent death (as war or criminal execution) and never buried. Therefore those of Ireland are here best esteemed, being very clean and white and often covered over with moss." Could there be any truer or more terrible picture of the state of Ireland at that time than this old simpler's unsuspecting phrase? It is darker even than the pages of Edmund Spenser, and recalls to the mind those woe-begotten days chronicled in the annals of Ulster when "great storms of war and pestilence" were sweeping over Ireland, and men lay in thousands where they fell.

It is into such hands that Ireland has fallen these many years, and it is no wonder, amidst these misunderstandings and prejudices, that they have learned to better the lesson of their masters, and give back in larger measure, hate for hate, and violence for violence, until their land has become a byword for reproach in English history. And it is no wonder that James Clarence Mangan, one of the chief among the Irish poets, looking back over the centuries of gradual annihilation of his beloved country, and despairing of all earthly succour, should have ad-

dressed his verse to that God, who above all is the God of the oppressed and the downtrodden:—

> "And Thou, O Mighty Lord, whose ways
> Are far above our feeble minds
> To understand
>
> Sustain us in these doleful days
> And render light the chain that binds
> Our fallen land.
>
> Look down upon our dreary state
> And through the ages that may still
> Roll sadly on,
>
> Watch Thou o'er hapless Erin's fate,
> And shield at least from darker ill
> The blood of Conn."

And now in these latter days, when the heart of the English people is touched by the long sufferings and despair of the Irish, now that they are willing at last to restore to them their liberty, and give into their hands the rule of their ancient land, it is perhaps too late. It is one of those biting pieces of irony of which the tide of human affairs is full. They would offer home rule to a people who have gone over the seas: they would give back to Ireland a desert where once her gardens blossomed as the rose.

Such has been the fate of the Irish in their wars, and their loves, in their worldly affairs, and in their national life. Misunderstanding and misunderstood, they have wrestled only half-heartedly with the world, and have been always worsted. And so, tired

of it all, and with the wistfulness of exiles upon their faces, exiles in a world where for them there is no abiding place, they have turned aside and strayed down "new thoroughfares in sad humanity." And there, untroubled and hidden from the strife of men, they dream their dreams and behold their visions, and satisfy that thirst that is in them for the things of the spirit. They have wished to dream, and they do not care where their dreams may lead them. The things of the earth are become as a shadow for them, and the true realities of life are only in

> "the dreams, the ever living
> Breathe on the burnished mirror of the world
> And then smooth out with ivory hands, and sigh." (18)

VII

3 It is pleasant to have come to our third theme for development, namely the humour of the Irish people: and profitable also as a balance to the foregoing section, and lest one should believe that the melancholy of the Celtic mind has made of the Irish a people "sullen in the sweet air," or

> "Thinkers of crooked thoughts upon life in the sere
> And on that which consigns men to night after shewing the day to them." (19)

Their many sorrows have never prevailed to take from them that gaiety and buoyancy of mind which is as distinctive an element in their character as the melancholy which we have just studied. Even the stark and terrible terseness of their histories is lightened at intervals with flashes of grim humour, and it is this more than anything else which draws one on to read them until the last page is turned. By a strange mischance, or rather by a just compensation, the saddest people seem always to be dowered with the readiest wit. With the Irish it is most certainly so. They have had to feed themselves on

the blessed bread of gaiety because otherwise they would have starved, and no doubt it is the despair of their actual lives which gives such a keen edge to the fictions of their minds. In this way the spirit of humour has become an intimate and inseparable part of their nature. It is not something apart and striven after laboriously like that of the Saxon mind. It is their atmosphere, the very air they breathe, something intangible yet vital. It is about the only inheritance which those who oppressed them were not able to take away.

Of all the races of the world the Irish seem the best fitted to catch the gayest, happiest attitude of things. Their wit has a lightness and a wisdom in it which even the French may not surpass: the world is full of the laughter that springs from their "happy unhappy answers." This twist of light-heartedness has been in their nature from the very beginning and has never failed of its irresistible charm. King Conari's jesters, so it is written in one of the old books of Ireland, were fellows of such inimitable wit that no man could refrain from laughing at them, even though the dead body of his father or mother lay stretched out before him. (20)

Sometimes the humour is due to that over-quickness of the Irish mind which is impatient of words and too hurried to be scrupulous about their meaning. It is this, for example, that accounts for the

mixed metaphors of the counsel for the plaintiff in an action brought for alleged malversation of three bullocks, who said, "Gentlemen of the Jury, it will be for you to say whether the defendant shall be allowed to come into the court with unblushing footsteps, with the cloak of hypocrisy in his mouth, and draw three bullocks out of my client's pockets with impunity." It accounts, too, for the words of an Irish member of the House of Commons, who, in speaking on a bill which proposed to extend the franchise in Ireland, said, "You should refrain from throwing open the flood gates of Democracy lest you pave the way for a general conflagration."

But in general the humour of the Irish is more natural, being bred of that happy unlikely turn of phrase which is their especial sign of recognition in the highways of the world. And though their point of view seems to us a little strange and ludicrous, it is to them direct and clear. They see things differently from ourselves, and perhaps more surely, for it is in their nature to follow that "new and remoter way of thinking" which Sir William Davenant took to be the soul of wit. What could be happier than to say of a lady of stiff, cold, formal manner, "She has all the characteristics of a poker —except its occasional warmth," or more oddly true than to describe a man of kindly feeling and sympathies as "a man whose heart would be touched by the bleatin' of a bruised worm"?

The Irish have too much regard for the truth to be dragging her out on every paltry occasion, and they have been careful to avoid the blunting of their wit with that scrupulosity and exactness which they associate with the "dull creeping Saxons." But in spite of this their humour seems rarely unreasonable: they keep always within distant hail of the probabilities of things.

There is something just, as well as winning, in the words of the old Irish woman who said of her umbrella that "it was a wonderful convenient conthrivance for hinderin' a body from gettin' drownded on a wet Sunday goin' to Mass," and who cast her scorn upon banks and banking by saying, "Troth and bedad I'd be long sorry to go pay away me bit of money into e'er an ould concern of a bank and have nothin' to show for it at the heel of the hunt except a scrawm on a scrap of paper."

Their lightning rapidity of thought is well shown by the old story of the man who was asked whether it was a son or a daughter that his sister had got. "The curse of the crows on me," he said, "but I don't know whether I'm an uncle or an aunt." And their wonderful familiarity with the Almighty appears very well in the words used by an old woman in reference to someone who had done her an injury. "I'll lave him to God," said she, "an' He'll play the divil with him."

But this side of Irish life is so well known that

there is no need to be labouring it with stories which are more or less of common knowledge. There is more charm in that indirect and delicate humour which one meets with here and there in the reading of Irish history and literature, and at the worst this will be less familiar than what has been already quoted.

VIII

THERE is a childlike simplicity and outspokenness in the tale of Irish affairs, for the Irish have ever been of this way of mind, and innocent of the subtleties that other races have grown up to possess. There never was such a confiding people created since the world began. The impossible has always pleased their fancy, and whatever to other men would seem too remote and difficult for belief is welcomed to their hearts with the conviction of truth. To their childlike credulity, as an English reviewer (21) has well observed, the Round Towers of Ireland are not ecclesiastical buildings, dating from about the 10th century, according to the consent of the learned, but pagan monuments of immense antiquity, connected with the worship of Baal, and quite peculiar to

Ireland. In a similar spirit, inspired of the faeries, enthusiasts were digging in the hill of Tara only a few years ago in the sure and certain hope of unearthing the Ark of the Covenant. Lough Dan has been gravely identified by them with the lost tribe of that name, and it is considered so unworthy of a true Irishman to admit any inferior strain between himself and the Chosen People, that Irish pedigrees are assiduously traced back to Noah or to Magog the son of Japhet.

One of the most delightful works for reading in the whole range of Irish literature is the dialogue between Oisin and St. Patrick, with a view to the former's conversion to the Christian faith. And this shews, perhaps better than any other, the pure fount of Irish humour, springing from no artificial source, but direct from the deep wells of childhood, with its artlessness and simple grace.

In the early stanzas of this, the old bard will not hear a single word from Patrick of "the solemn psalms." His mind is preoccupied with memories of the time before he went to the Country of the Young: his anger is against the Christ, and against the host of his white-handed saints who have overcome the princely host of the Fianna. "Were Fionn alive and the Fianna comely and warlike, with their hounds running propitiously, they would seem to me more majestic than those who dwell in heaven. . . . . I would rather be in Fionn's court,

harkening to the voices of hounds every morning, and meditating on hard fought battles, than in the court of Jesus Christ, that is certain. . . . . One day only, in company with clergy of the bells, is longer to me than if I were to be in hell of torments as long as God shall be in heaven."

Then he turns upon St. Patrick and the priests and derides them with a fine scorn for the way they have "to be ever beating their breasts and each evening kneeling under gloom," weak fasting men without liberality, having no dinners or banquets like the banquets of the Fianna. Cruagan the brave would consume at one meal what they would make last through the year: "were he alive he would not like Rome's clergy." If Ciarnan his friend, dreadful in plunder, were there, it is not any food they would be getting for themselves at all, "it would not be pleasant to thy clergy were he alive." Better to the ears of Oisin the cry of battle's remembrance from Fionn's Dord than the shrill, doleful prayers of coward priests. Better to go down into the thick of battle and perish there by fair sway of swords than to be spending long, weary lives in cells, muttering over the white books from Rome.

It is more than clever the way St. Patrick handles the rebellious spirit of the old blind man, once Oisin the mighty chief of the Fianna, now only a singer of things gone in the wind. He gives him full rein to work off his raging anger, and to make a lamentation

for the mighty heroes of his youth. He leads him on to sing their praise, and to tell the story of their deeds. The Fianna live again for a while under the magic song of the bard, and the battle of the Hill of Slaughter is fought afresh. Osgur, the mighty champion of perfect training, goes out once more against Tailc of Severe Hands, slayer of a thousand men, and it is five days and five nights without food, without drink, without slumber, before the head of Tailc is levelled with the dust. Then follows the combat with Meargach of the Green Blade, and this time more than ten days of incessant fighting elapse before he and his two sons are "deficient of their heads." And lastly, when the noise of battle is hushed, between the silent ranks of the opposing hosts, comes Aile the queen, the wife and mother of the slain, of whom Oisin says, that neither Patrick nor his God had ever seen a woman of equal beauty to hers, or with such a glory of golden hair. And she makes over the fallen, her "three champions of light, her three great lions," a lament so tender and so pitifully sad, that even the warriors of the two armies hang their heads, and tears come rushing in to blind their eyes. With these "unhappy, far-off things, and battles long ago," Oisin spends his frail store of strength, and then the Saint takes the word, and has his will upon the weakness of the old blind man. He tells him it is foolish to be turning his thoughts away from God, and to be

dwelling always upon the days of his youth, for green nettles grow where the palace of Fionn once stood, and he and his warlike bands are enclosed in the hell of torments and burdened and subjected for ever. And he shews Oisin a vision of hell so terrible, with demons and iron flails, and sparks flying out of the ribs of the damned, that the aged bard shrinks with terror, and asks Patrick for the grace of baptism, lest he, too, should go to the same place. Thereupon, the real charm and humour of the dialogue begins. There never was such an innocent disciple of the faith in the whole history of Christendom, nor one at the same time more careful about the benefits to be received from Holy Church. "Patrick tell me (if it is thou, hast the most correct information), will my hound and my dog be allowed to go with me to the mansion of the King of grace. I would know if He is a generous man in his house, and if He will let the legions of the Fianna come under shelter of His holy heaven. If your God is generous in miracles, He will have pity on me, sightless: if once I get inside the door I will suddenly request Him to heal me. I will receive knowledge of God if He is hurriedly liberal in the distribution of food: if He has abundance of bread I will remain in His company for ever: Tell unto thy God that there was no knowledge with Fionn or with the Fianna of His existence in their own time: and that, if they had known it, His pleasure would have

seemed courteous in their eyes." When St. Patrick has answered or evaded these searching inquiries, he proceeds to instruct his novice in the elements of the faith, but they do not get very far; the old pagan is quite unteachable. For, when St. Patrick tells him that sin and death came into the world because Eve pulled an apple which God told her not to touch, he makes this delicious comment. "If, when I and Diarmuid lived in Tuab-herard, we had known that God was in want of apples, we would have sent to Him, in heaven, seven horses and one mule laden with apples." Their minds and souls were whole seas and centuries apart: and then, too, Oisin will keep on praying God to relieve the Fianna from the house of pains, though he is told that "it is like throwing stones at the sun or the moon to pray for souls that are in hell." This is a breach between them to the end, but Oisin will not desist. He has read the book of Holy Scripture and believes that nothing is impossible for God to do. At the worst "he can just leave them where they are, and yet give them delightful coolness." And the legend finishes by shewing that he had his reward, for a messenger came from God to say that the Fianna, although not removed from the place where they had been so long, had got relief from their pains. After this, Oisin becomes a great penitent, and, till the time of death, "he every day wetted three sheets with his tears." (22)

This vein of delicate humour is sustained throughout the dialogue to a degree that is unusual in Irish literature. In general, the work of the bards is very uneven: one has sometimes to turn over a large mass of rough ore before coming across a single, sparkling gem of wit. But these gems are precious when one lights upon them at last, for their lustre is of that rare quality which never grows dim with use. It may be entertaining to follow our present theme still further by setting out a few of these waifs and strays of wit that the writer has chanced upon, here and there, in the byeways of old books.

IX

One of the charges against the Great Earl of Kildare, brought to England for trial in the reign of King Henry VIII., related that he had sacreligiously burned the cathedral church of Cashel, to which he replied that it was true enough but that he would not have done so, only he thought the Archbishop was in it. And the rest of his replies were framed in similar style, and gave such pleasure to the bluff King Hal, that he pardoned him all his crimes on the

spot. It is refreshing indeed to turn aside from the delicate diplomacy of English affairs to the simplicity of such things among the Irish. It is written somewhere that Conn O'Neill claimed tribute from O'Donnell, and wrote to him in Irish in the following terms: "O'Donnell, send me my rent or if you don't——" to which O'Donnell promptly wrote in reply: "O'Neill, I owe you no rent, and if I did——" whereupon O'Neill flew to arms, and the war began.

It is natural enough in the literature of the Land of Saints that there should be a multitude of legends touching the disciples of Christ and their adversary, the Devil. The subject is one so entertaining, that it may be wise to restrict ourselves, at the outset, to three of these. The first is a charming story out of the life of St. Columb. We are told that, at the time when the Saint was surreptitiously copying St. Finnen's Book of Psalms at Drumfinn, Finnen sent a messenger to spy out what he was doing. But St. Columb's pet crane, happening to be with him, walked over to the door and neatly picked out the man's eye through the keyhole. As to the Devil, Angus the Culdee tells us that he once paid a visit in disguise to St. Molling, who soon discovered who he was, and recommended him to go on his knees and pray. "Oh!" said he, "I am not able to kneel, for my knees are at the back of my legs." (23) From the devil it is but a little way to the thought

of hell, and indeed Irish books are filled with all manner of fantastic speculation about this place. Satan was a familiar theme for the imagination of the curious. They seem to have studied him from the life, and whatever they write of him has a sense of ease and assurance about it. The punishment of hell, in the Irish mind, has often some relation to the crime and sometimes the very instruments of wrongdoing followed the wretch to hell, and were there turned to his own torture. The sons of O'Corri saw a man digging in a garden, on one of the islands of hell, while both spade and handle were red hot, which punishment he was doomed to, because when on earth he worked every Sunday, digging in his garden. (24)

X

To search for humour in the laws of a people would seem to be the most profitless undertaking that a man could conceive. There is a deadness and uniformity about the legal mind which blasts, at the outset, all hope of wit: to the cheerful man the general body of jurisprudence is " weary, flat, stale,

and unprofitable." Fortunately there is very little of this in the Brehon laws of the Irish: and one may find in their pages many curious things, and always quaintly expressed. This is no doubt due in a measure to the happy accident of their birth. For, whereas in other codes the framers have most often been the judges of the land, and (shall one say it?) "learned without sense and venerably dull," the Irish were careful to choose differently for the making of theirs. Three kings, and three saints, and three sages of poetry, of literature, and of language, sat together in council soon after the coming of St. Patrick, and, with the general consent of the common people, wrote down the traditional laws of Ireland: they are called in the words of the legend the "nine props of the Senchus Mor." A further safeguard from the conventional dulness of the law lay in the custom, prevalent among the Irish from early days, to entrust the care of justice to the poets, and this no doubt was done for the reason that poets, alone, could put the lex non scripta into the rhythm of verse for the easier memory of the people at large. The light touch of their fancy is still traceable in the laws and legal formulæ, as, for instance, the swearing of oaths by the elements, and "the dew, the crops, and the countenances of men," and the limitation of property, "while the sea surrounds Erin," or "so long as the sun and wind remain." We should smile nowadays at the very

thought of committing the charge of national affairs to such aery, irresponsible persons as poets: but in Ireland the policy worked well, and the common people were content, at any rate for a while. Then, somehow, their imagination took a more soaring flight, clean out of the sphere of time, and space, and reason, and their speech got lost in archaic forms and an elaborate and intricate style. It is recorded in the chronicles of the reign of Conchobar MacNessa, who lived and died about the time of Christ, that once, when there was a public contest on a point of law between two of the poet-judges, neither the King, nor his chiefs, nor anyone else could understand a word they said, "so great was their high, noble, beautiful obscurity," whereupon the King was filled with indignation at this insult to his intelligence, and took away the privilege of judicature from the poets for ever and made special judges in their stead.

Another feature of the Brehon laws is their intimate concern with every side of life. There are rules and regulations to meet every possible contingency; and indeed their range is so comprehensive, and their attention to detail so minute, that one may gather, from reading them, the closest idea of Irish social and civic life. Thus, for example, to choose at random, there are penalties prescribed for personal injuries caused by brooches, whose points project beyond the shoulder,

and compensation for the sting of bees. It is ordained that the domestic cat shall be pardoned for eating the food in the kitchen, if this is lying negligently about, but punished if the food be taken from the security of a vessel or other kitchen utensil. Care is taken to regulate the quantity of ale allowed at a dinner to laymen and clerics respectively, six pints to a layman, and three to a cleric. It is added that the latter were so restricted in order that they "may not be drunk, and that their canonical hours may not in consequence be set astray on them." If a middle-sized pig be caught trespassing his owner shall pay to the party aggrieved half a sack of good corn. If a doctor fail to make his patient well he shall not be entitled to any fee, nor shall an artificer be paid for his work unless, on its completion, he gives his personal blessing to it in the presence of his master. A fine of two cows is inflicted for a "lump" blow, that is a blow which bruises but draws no blood, and the same penalty applies for shaving a man against his will. And if a priest so far forget himself as to curse his servant, he shall have administered to him 100 blows on the bare hand, and bread and water for a day and a night. There are many laws also dealing with fosterage, or the giving and taking of children for nurture, and rules for their upbringing according to their position in the seven grades of society. The distinctions of class are truly instructive. The sons of the lower

orders were taught the herding and care of cattle, and all manner of beasts, kiln-drying, the combing of wool, and wood-cutting; and the daughters must learn the use of the quern, the sieve, and the kneading-trough. Those of higher rank, if sons, were brought up to swim and to shoot, to play chess and perform upon the instruments of music, while the daughters were employed in needle work, cutting out, and embroidery. "And a king's son shall have horses in times of races." Another more amusing discrimination of class is afforded by the rule which says that stirabout, or porridge as we call it, shall be given to all, but the flavouring which goes into it shall vary: salt butter for the inferior grades, fresh butter for the sons of chiefs, and honey for the sons of kings.

With regard to the sanction of these laws there are not many direct provisions. There was no need of compulsion, for the reverence of traditional law was a stronger trait than any other in the character of the Irish. The purity of justice has always been a matter of national pride. They say in one of their celebrated Triads, "Three glories of a gathering: a judge without perturbation, a decision without reviling, terms agreed upon without fraud." To disturb a public assembly was a crime most venial to them, a crime beyond the atonement of a fine, requiring the capital penalty of death. One peculiar method of enforcing the Brehon laws was the

practice of "fasting," whereby a man, being injured, would wait patiently outside the door of the offending person without food for a prescribed period, and if thereupon the offender refused to cede to the fasting, he was to pay double the thing for which he was fasted upon. There are some quaint stories told of this practice in Irish literature. It is said that Amergin MacAuley fasted on the old sage Fintan till he forced him to relate the ancient history of Ireland. Conall Derg O'Corra and his wife, having failed to obtain children from God, turned to the Devil and fasted on him to give them children, and obtained their request. (25) Nay, a legend relates that a certain man, thinking himself hardly used by providence, grumbled and fasted against God for relief, and the tale goes on to say that God was angry but nevertheless dealt mercifully with him. (26)

There was, however, an alternative for the offender. He might "give a pledge to fasting" and have the case tried, and thereupon the province of the Brehon or judge began. Now it must not be thought from the foregoing levity that justice was left to the will of chance or the momentary caprice of the judges. The Brehons were, by rank and training, men of integrity and wisdom. Their only thought was to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before the God of Truth. They held the scales evenly between the old law of retaliation, as varied by time-

honoured precedents, and that law of forgiveness which the blessed St. Patrick had taught them out of the Gospels. All was done without haste, decently, and in solemn form. We are told of one of their number that " he was not wont to make his decree until he had pondered upon it in his breast the night before." It has been said of them, disparagingly, that when they were at their wits' end for a decision, before the coming of the Faith, they consulted the Druids, and came at the truth by the help of their sorceries and spells. However that may be, there certainly was one instrument of supernatural aid which the Brehons frequently used. In England of old time, it was often said that the administration of equity varied according to the measure of the Chancellor's foot. In Ireland, it seems to have varied according to the pressure of the magic collar of Moran, of which, legend relates that, when placed about the neck of a judge, it would contract and go near to choke him if he was about to deliver a false judgment, and relax, and leave him free to speak, if he pronounced what was true and of right accustomed. It was equally efficient when placed about the neck of a witness inclined to perjury. There is no wonder then, with such a beneficent and complete code of law, and such worthy judges, and such heavenly interposition in time of error, that, in the golden age of Ireland, the nation was united as one family, and that peace and prosperity reigned

within its borders. It is such a period of rest and content that the Triad reflects, which says, "Three slender things that best support the world: the slender stream of milk into the pail, the slender blade of green corn upon the ground, the slender thread over the hand of a skilled woman." It is this more than anything else which led to the jealousy and covetousness of the strangers from over sea, this which drew on the raids of the Danes, and invasions of the Normans, to destroy the homes and break the hearts of the Irish people for ever.

The work of destruction has been fully accomplished now. There is nothing left of that fair civilisation save the mouldering records which hold its memory. For the remnant of this people there is no inheritance at all. It is a hard struggle for them to earn even their daily bread. The only things left them to cherish are dreams of a glory that is clean passed away, and a grim hope, in spite of everything, of a possible revenge.

It is perhaps fitting, with this last thought in our minds, and at this time when Ireland and its affairs are playing so large and vital a part in our political life, that we should close our selection from literary and historical sources with the following prophecy from the Book of Howth, a vellum folio of the 16th century, written in thirteen different hands.

". . . . . long life and oft fighting shall be for the land, and the land shall be harried and stained

with great slaughter of men, but the English shall have the mastery a little before doomsday, and that land shall be from sea to sea i-castelled and fully won, but the Englishmen shall be after that well feeble in the land and disdained."

XI

THERE is one theme above all which should have place of honour in any study of the Celtic Mind, and that is the passion with which it holds by its inheritance of learning. The word "passion" is used advisedly, for the men of this race are no "half believers of their casual creeds," no languid diners without appetite at the banquet of life. They give themselves absolutely to life as they have come to know it, and their days are full, and their minds and souls are on fire with the things that are eager and intense and passionate. "And it is," as Fiona Macleod said, "this eagerness and thirst, a thirst above all for the things of the spirit, which makes them turn so often from the near securities and prosperities, and indeed all beside, setting their hearts aflame with vain, because illimitable, desires. For them, the wisdom before which knowledge is a frosty breath—the beauty that is beyond the beautiful." (27) They have always had this nervous desire to get apart from actual life: and the desire has been quickened by the sad course of their national history. In spite of all they have suffered, the Irish have never been mere cowards of fate or

dumb beholders of calamity. Bereft of earthly treasure, they sought elsewhere that "calmer statelier wealth of wisdom" which neither force nor fate can take away. Tired of the deceit of a people who promised them peace, "whereas the sword reacheth unto the soul," they took shelter in the unfailing peace of God the Father. In the midst of derelection these men were perhaps too ready to forsake all things that they might follow remote ways of thought, or plunge into the sea of God. They were constantly longing, as in the hermit's song, rendered by Dr. Kuno Meyer, "for a hidden little hut in the wilderness that it may be my dwelling, a clear pool to wash away sins through the Holy Spirit, quite near, a beautiful wood around it on every side, a few shining candles above the pure white scriptures. . . . . And I to be sitting awhile praying to God there and in every place." And if this sacred quiet could not be theirs, if, as often chanced, they were driven to wear out their lives in ceaseless wandering, there were still those other candles, the three candles that illumine every darkness, truth, nature, knowledge. These were enough to light them to the end of their difficult way till their own lives flickered with the last, quick, breath of life, till they were forced to own with Sadi that

> "Like a taper one must melt in pursuit of learning,
> Since without learning one cannot know God."

Such has been the devotion of the Irish in the

following after learning and piety, that they have won for their land, without dispute, the title of "Insula sanctorum et doctorum." The regard that these people have always had for spiritual things has come to form the bed rock of their national character, and it is this, more than anything else, that gives the clue to the meaning of their life. The faiths of the world, whether they be Pagan or Christian, have been chief among the nurseries of genius, and if in the Irish and their literature there is a charm which may not be found elsewhere, it is due, as we believe, to their unwavering fidelity in the love and worship of the Ever Living Ones, and in the quest of the things that are eternal and pass not away. Their earliest Gods, with the exception perhaps of Mannanan Mac Lir, God of the Sea, and the Dagda, with his cauldron of magic and his harp of death, and Morrigu, Goddess of Destruction, had in them a spirit of beauty and gentleness, contrasting strangely with the savage nature of the early gods of other races, and it is perhaps their pervading influence that has had most force in the framing of the Irish mind.

Their ocean God was Mannanan Mac Lir,
Whose angry lips
In their white foam full often would inter
Whole fleets of ships.
Crom was their day god, and their thunderer,
Made morning and eclipse:
Bride was their queen of song, and unto her
They pray'd with fire-touched lips. (28)

And Dana, the mother of the Gods, stands out most clear and merciful of all in the well-known lines of a living poet:

> "I am the heartbreak over fallen things,
> The sudden gentleness that stays the blow,
> And I am in the kiss that foemen give
> Pausing in battle, and in the tears that fall
> Over the vanquished foe,—and in the highest
> Among the Danaan Gods, I am the last
> Council of mercy in their hearts where they
> Mete justice from a thousand starry thrones." (29)

Inspired by beneficent Gods such as these, the Irish have always been driven on by a great desire to attain that "vision of the rainbow-aureoled face of her whom men name Beauty," and along the ways of wisdom and culture, and with the love in their hearts of Bride, their queen of song, and her praise on their fire-touched lips, they have sought out the expression of Beauty incarnate in her manifold forms. Their quest has surely been easier and more pleasant to them through the wonderful gifts that they have in their language. Here, there is a wealth of phrase, and a store of colour and music, which many a poet of an alien country has envied. This is

> "The speech that wakes the soul in withered faces
> And wakes remembrance of great things gone by." (30)

And in this beautiful, unmixed, Aryan language which, with the exception of Greek, has left the

longest, most luminous, and most consecutive literary track behind it of the vernacular tongues of Europe—in this, when kindled with the fire of poetry, there is a spell and a solace, of which it has been well said:

> "It charmed away the merchant from his guile,
> And turned the farmer's memory from his cattle,
> And hushed in sleep the roaring ranks of battle:
> For all who heard it dreamed a little while."

XII

So great was the fame of Irish scholarship at the height of its civilisation, that the land became, as it were, the seminary for the training of the greater part of the intellect of Europe. And, to pluck the matured fruit from the tree of knowledge in the Irish schools, there came from all parts men who thought even lightly of the danger of the seas and of the mastery of a language, which, in its difficulty, is surpassed, perhaps, by no other civilised tongue. Indeed, to those who have bent their will to the learning of Irish, the following passage out of Holinshed will scarcely seem very remarkable. "A gentle-

man of mine acquaintance reported that he did see a woman in Rome which was possessed of a babbling spirit that could have chatted any language save the Irish, and that it was so difficult as the very devil was gravelled thereat. A gentleman, that stood by, answered that he took the speech to be so sacred and holy that no damned fiend had the power to speak it. Nay, by God's mercy, man (quoth the other), I stand in doubt (I tell you), whether the Apostles in their copious mart of languages at Jerusalem could have spoken Irish if they were opposed,—whereat the company heartily laughed."

All the fair promise of a great future for Irish learning and literary eminence was wrecked by the destruction and cruelties of the Danish and Norman invasions. The schools were broken up, an infinite number of priceless manuscripts were burnt, and the Irish "sons of learning," as these wise men modestly called themselves, were sent into exile over the sea. There, in poverty, friendless, and bereft of their old sources of knowledge, they dragged out wretchedly the length of their days, consumed with a hopeless longing to return to their Alma Mater, and build up again her desolate habitations. One catches a glimpse of them now and again, chiefly in those personal notes which it was their custom to put in the margin of their manuscripts. Here is one of the poor brother Fergal O'Gara, of the Augustinian Order, who was spending the residue of his days in making

a great collection of poems on themes in Irish History. He says, "Of each one that shall read this book, and observe aught that in the same is wrongly written or omitted, I crave pardon that they will not wrongly blame me, seeing that I had not any to teach me these things," and later he adds, "here I break off until morning, and I in gloom and grief, and during my life's length, unless only that I may have one look at Ireland."

Some, more fortunate than their brethren, were allowed to enter into the University of Oxford, and, though it was not many years before this license was recalled, and they were sent wandering again, they left behind them a record of which even their own country might be proud. The quaint notices of the lives of some of these men in Holinshed, and in Ware's Writers, are too interesting to pass over.

Of David de la Hyde, Fellow of Merton in 1549, it is certified that he was "An exquisite and profound clerk, very well seen in the Latin and Greek tongues, expert in the mathematicals, a proper antiquary, and an exact divine, whereby I gather that his pen has not been lazy, but is daily breeding of such learned books as shall be available to his posterity." (31) Then, too, there is Nicholas Quemerford, who took his degree after spending four years in Oxford, "pecking and hewing at logic and philosophy." And Elias Sheth, born at Kilkenny, who wrote "divers sonnets, and was a gentleman of pass-

ing good wit—a pleasant conceited companion, full of mirth without gall," and finally one "Nicholas Eustace, a student of divinity, who, notwithstanding he was born to a fair living, yet did wholly sequester himself from the world."

With those few of the "sons of learning" who stayed on in Ireland among the ruins of their former glory, life must have gone very hardly, if one may judge from the notes in the margin of *their* manuscripts. "I am tired," writes the transcriber of a Great Digest of the Brehon Law, "I am tired,—I being this day without food, and I crave help of God." "My writing equipment is bad," complains another, "a soft, spiky pen, foxy, thick ink, vellum stony and green, and (into the bargain) grief." Another is angry at the disordering of his papers: "My curse and God's curse into the bargain I bestow on the women that have muddled up together all that I possessed in the way of ink, of colour, and of books." Another looks sadly upon his manuscript, and notes in the margin, "This writing of mine is not worth bragging about—if it were so I would." And here, lastly, is the prayer of one who hears, as he writes, the tumult of battle, and has the fear of sudden death in his soul. "The conflict rages in every district of Medhbs provinces, and I implore the king of both the hither and the yonside world to shield self and comrades, with me, from all harm, both here and hereafter." (32)

XIII

THIS is perhaps the place to say how extraordinary (considering the unpeace of this people and the incessant turmoil and upset of their country) is the amount of their literary production. After all the burning and destruction, after these many centuries of the printing and publishing of books, after the unwearied industry in translation of Irish scholars during the last fifty years, there is, it is estimated, still enough inedited manuscript material in Old Irish to fill 1,500 volumes in thick folio.

The winning of knowledge seems never to have brought weariness to the Irish people. They have kept unabated their feverish desire for books and the making of books. It was not in their way to complain of the price of a manuscript, though, as was the case with a book in the library of the Great Earl of Kildare, it should cost them as much as twenty cows. Nor was it their way to murmur at any long travel or fatigue of body spent in search of knowledge, though, as is recorded in the case of St. Columb, the journey should extend to 200 miles. But it is, perhaps, unfortunate to have fallen upon this instance of St. Columb's long journey, for one has to confess that there *was* murmuring, and more than murmuring, at the end thereof. The legend runs, that this

saint came down these many miles from Iona to study the Irish Annals of a brother saint, who was so little saintly, that he would not receive St. Columb to the place of his manuscripts and parchments. Thereupon St. Columb (how one loves the trait of righteous anger in his character!) rained down curses for a whole hour, and implored the Almighty to make all the books of this false saint of no service to him or to his successors. "And these manly curses," says the legend, "were heard afar off in heaven, and the good Lord sent an Angel, who altered all the books of this selfish saint into a language which none of the sons of men have ever been able to understand."

There have been no books anywhere in the world so beloved of their owners as the books of Ireland, beloved not with the love we give to inanimate things that are beautiful, but with the almost human affection we yield to things that are lovely, and have about them the signs of life and immortality. It is, as one remembers this, that one finds a genuine pathos in the legend which says, that on the death of Longharad of Sleeve Margy, a most eminent scholar of the 6th century, "the whole of the book satchels of Ireland fell down from their racks on that night." (33)

XIV

But we must turn away from these things now to give some account of the old Irish bards, perhaps the most perfect flower of their civilisation, men of whom it is said that "their lips won battles," who as successors to the Druids, and to their mysteries, enjoyed the veneration and power that their wisdom had won, men who knew how to make the past live again,

> "to recall the blind,
> Forewandered years and round their temples bind
> Fresh coronals of lovelier memories." (34)

And men, again, whose calm far-seeing eyes looked down the vista of the centuries to come, of whom it might be said, as it was said of Cathvah the Druid,

> "his voice was like a sea's
> For mystery and awe, and like the brooding sea
> Blue were his druid eyes, and sad with things to come." (35)

The record of the national life of Ireland is dark enough, but it had been far darker without the sweet influences of these men. It is true enough that they were inclined to sit in the seat of the scornful, and were given to the making of fierce satires and the firing of smouldering passions, but more often still they were engaged in the making of peace.

Again and again we read of the intervention of bards who, shaking the chain of silence between the quarrelling chiefs, succeeded in calming the strife; and the fragment from the romance from Fionn Mac Cumhal that follows is only one of very many evidences of the worthy part played by these men in Irish affairs.

" . . . . . It was then that the prophesying poet of the pointed words, that guerdon-full good man of song, Fergus of the Fair Lips, rose up, and all the Fenian men of science along with him, and they sang their hymns and good poems and their perfect lays to those heroes to silence and to soften them. It was then they ceased from their slaughtering and maiming on hearing the music of the poets, and they let their weapons fall to earth, and the poets took up their weapons, and they went between them and grasped them with the grasp of reconciliation."

One must not approach the work of these men with too vehement a desire for the truth. After all, it was their métier to put a thread of poetry round the bare chronicle of wasted time, to give unto the world beauty for its ashes. Who shall blame them that they have woven too many threads of this kind or used colours too strong and deep for our weak eyes to bear? The thought of colour indeed is the one which always leaps to the mind as one thinks of these splendid singers of long ago "in rhythmic cadence dressing life's discordant tale." For,

springing as they did from the noble families of Ireland, and being, by virtue of their office, held equal in rank with the King himself, they were allowed the use of all the six colours in their robes as a sign of honour.

And, throughout their work also, one may see how lavish they were in ornament and decorated phrase, how they loved too well to cast their thought and fancy into words of many hue and make them radiant with excess of light and rich with trappings grand and gay.

Here is a word picture made by one of them, giving the likeness of Queen Maeve of Connact: "A beautiful, pale, long-faced woman with flowing, golden hair; upon her a crimson cloak fastened with a brooch of gold, over her breast a straight ridged spear blazing red in her hand." And here, again, is an account of the army she marshalled for the invasion of Ulster: "The first corps had on them black heads of hair, and green mantles held with silver brooches, and, next to their skins, shirts of gold thread having round patterns of gold. The second corps were clad in grey mantles and pure white shirts, and helmets of gold were upon their heads, hiding their hair. The third corps had flowing yellow hair, with sheen of gold, all cast loose, fine-wrought, crimson mantles, with cunning devices of ornaments enwrapped therein, and at their breast they had golden, jewelled brooches; and silken

shirts, fine textured, touched the middle of their insteps."

Another bard sings of the glories of the palace of Emania, with its three times fifty rooms, and the walls made of the red yew. The King's room was in the front of the house, and was large enough for thirty warriors. It was ornamented with silver, and bronze, and carbuncles, and precious stones, so that day and night were equally light therein. A gong of silver hung behind the king, suspended from the roof-tree, and, when he struck it with his silver wand with the three golden apples tied to it, all the men of Ulster were silent. And not far away was the tower of Deirdre of the Sorrows, whence she looked out with desire upon the youth Naisi, the son of Uisneach, his skin white as the driven snow, his hair black as the raven's wing, and on his cheeks a blooming red, deep as the blood of the calf.

XV

Apart from this use of colour, there is much graciousness in the songs and writings of the bards. They delighted in whatsoever things were fair and venerable. Just as Augustine in his youth, so they,

too, loved to dwell in their work upon such things as the comeliness of the body, the fair harmony of time, the brightness of the light, sweet melodies of every kind, perfumes of flowers, and the delectableness of lovely limbs. And yet, with all this, there is mixed a strange grotesqueness and mystery which comes, it may be, as an heritage from those far off times when the Gods fought with each other upon the earth, and worked terrible signs and wonders among the children of men.

The early tales are shrouded in druid mists, clouds of darkness, and showers of fire and blood, like those the Firbolgs cast over the men of Dea, the way they could not see or speak with one another through the length of three days. And they seem the more terrible and unreal because they come to pass in a world of enchantment, where things change and interchange with startling rapidity, so that a man might appear one time in his own natural shape, and the next as a salmon of knowledge, shining in the sea, and after that, perhaps, as the God "who spreads light in the gathering on the hills." We read of Midir the Proud, of the Yellow Hair, and Etain, daughter of Etar, King of the Riders of the Sidhe, escaping together from the rage of Eochaid in the form of two swans, high up, linked by a chain of gold, and we are told how wonder fell on the Milesians, seeing Eriu, the wife of Mac Greine, Son of the Sun, one moment a wide-

eyed most beautiful queen, and, in another, a sharp-beaked gray-white crow. And through all these bewildering scenes of transformation, one seems to hear the magic harps of the Sidhe, playing that music which may bring men swiftly to their death, or cast over them the spell of deep sleep, or make them suddenly forget the faces of women they have madly loved.

In this dim atmosphere everything is portentous. Those who come and go loom vast and confusedly before us. They are not of our petty size nor subject to our weakness. They perform prodigious feats carelessly, as if with one hand, and what to us would be an Odyssey they accomplish at one stride. One man will go out to the fight alone, and slay so many, that they will never be known till "we number the stars of the sky, or flakes of snow, or the dew on the grass, or the horses of the Son of Lir in a stormy sea." Another will prefer to feast, and eat a whole ox and two score cakes of bread, and then go lightly to the hunting of deer. Another will stay quietly in his dun, and say words that will make the very clouds to tremble, or frame curses so fearful as to quench the candles at the further end of his banquet hall.

Notwithstanding all this extravagance of thought and high-sounding phrase, they were honest men, these bards. They loved to play with the jewelled words, and cast a veil of mythical greatness about

the heroes of their songs. It was not desirable, in their minds, to forego their wonderful inheritance of fancy for a mess of facts. They preferred the ways of romance to the dull routine of the truth: they are honest because they will declare it. Some of them are well nigh as candid as that critical scribe of the Book of Leinster, who writes of the exploits in the Tain, "I who have transcribed this history do not myself put faith in all things therein. Some are the tricks of the devil, some the figments of poets, some things are like the truth and some are not, and some things are only for the amusement of fools."

Whatever be the faults and failings of these bards, their songs remain to this day as the fairest relic of the ancient glory of Ireland. And more than that. They linger still in the hearts of the common people. They are a joy and a solace to them, even in these latter days of dereliction, when the glory is departed, and the age of heroes is over. It is when a nation has fallen on evil days that it clings the most closely to the memory of its former greatness: and with these people it is especially true. Is it too fanciful to say that, as the evening of Time begins to close round them, they warm themselves with the thought of the beacon fires of the past, and are heartened by the song of the bards to go on further into the night, to endure hardness until the end? (36)

XVI

But it is time to loose ourselves from the spell of these bards, and proceed on our way, for it is well we should tarry some while with their successors, the sweet singers of our own time, who catch for us the fugitive airs, the exquisite fleeting cadences, the haunting indefinable music, of an earlier day, and so follow faithfully in the long tradition of Irish song.

We have already observed the strange blend of light-heartedness and despair that has gone to the making of Irish Verse, and we have found that the prevailing note is one of deep melancholy, the dominant characteristic is one of gloom, of unavailing regret, of mournful longing, a lament for what cannot be again. "And for all the blithe songs and happy abandon of so many Irish singers, the Irish themselves have given us the most poignant, the most hauntingly sad lyric cries in all modern literature. (37)

Let us look more closely at this poetry, and find out by analysis something of its composition, the secret of its charm, and the causes of its weakness.

The very first thing that strikes one is the great lack, in this verse, of the stuff of which life is made. There are here no full-blooded men, active, and full

of energy, conquering the world, and living out their hasty lives in great cities, amid the roar and rattle of machinery they have known to invent. There is none of the glare of the sun at noonday, and but little said of the strife and stress in the work-a-day world. No: the wells where the Irish bards find their refreshing, and their inspiration, are very far away from our hard world, in a twilight land of faery and mystery, where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest. It is here that these dreamers go among their dreams. It is beside these still waters that they bring to harbour their wills, so often adrift on the sea of desire, here that they satisfy, at last, their great thirst for eternity.

"Hunters of Shadows — they themselves are Shades," (38) and the poetry that they make is but the weaving of dreams upon a loom that is fashioned out of a weeping mist, and out of the sorrow that is in the wind, and the ancient sadness that is in the sea. For this dream poetry they have been much blamed, and there is no doubt that its detachment, and its dwelling overmuch on a narrow range of emotions, are chief among the limitations of Irish verse. It is full of the unsweetened fruit and frail flowers that grow on the northerly summits of Parnassus, and lit only by the blood-red light of the sun-setting. Perhaps it would have been better it should have known something, at least, of the southern slopes, and the gladness of the sun at noonday, the

full ripeness of fruit, and the fragrance of flowers.

But this aspect of life has been denied the Irish People, and it is hard to see why their verse should be blamed, because of a limitation it has not been in their power to avoid. If poetry be the sincere effluence of life, the Celtic peoples could not have written otherwise than they have done. From a race, which in the words of one of its children, is but " Flotsam and waif in Time's eternal sea," (39) it is uncritical to demand that width of experience, and that ardour and joy in living, which can only spring from men whose fates have been spun more fortunately.

XVII

Another leading element in Irish poetry, one that it has in larger measure than the poetry of other nations, is that supreme pathos which is born of the eternal procession of men and things, and of the contrast between the frailty of the children of men, and the abiding strength of the Gods whose years endure through all generations. The whole range

of Irish literature has been touched with this spirit of impermanence. In the colloquy between Caoilte and St. Patrick, a maiden of wonderful beauty approaches them as they talk together, with the light, graceful step of youth. "It is Flower-Lustre," cries Caoilte, "my love of long ago." Patrick looks wonderingly from one to the other, from Caoilte, a withered ancient trembling on the verge of death, to the girl, tall and fair as a lily by his side, and then asks how this may be. "She," says the old man, with a bitter sigh, "is of the tuatha de'danann, who are unfading, and whose duration is perennial. I am of the sons of Milesius, that are perishable, and fade away."

Walter Raleigh, in his fine study of Shakespeare, speaking of the Sonnets, has said, "The tragedy of which they speak is the topic and inspiration of all poetry; it is the triumph of Time, marching relentlessly over the ruins of human ambitions and human desires. It may be read in all nature and in all art; there are hints of it in the movement of the dial hand, in the withering of flowers, in the wrinkles on a beautiful face; it comes home with the harvests of autumn, and darkens hope in the eclipse of the sun and moon; the yellowing papers of the poet, and the crumbling pyramids of the builder, tell of it; it speaks in the waves that break upon the shore, and in the histories that commemorate bygone civilisations."

It is this tragedy in life that is the occasion and the fibre of Irish Verse. It is from the ruins of their old civilisation, and from the wreckage of their dreams, that the Irish have fashioned into beauty those elegies which haunt the mind with their melancholy grace.

" Solomon! where is thy throne? It is gone in the wind.
Babylon! where is thy might? It is gone in the wind.
All that the genius of man hath achieved or designed
Waits but its hour to be dealt with as dust by the wind." (40)

Yet another element in Irish Poetry is the very large concern it has with love and all the strange ways of love. It is the chief theme of their verse, as it is of their life, and in fixing the relation of their mind with that of other nations in the world's history, they have not overlooked this. The old lines run :

" For acuteness and valour the Greeks,
For excessive pride the Romans,
For dulness the creeping Saxons,
For beauty and amorousness the Gaidhils."

" For beauty and amorousness the Gaidhils." It is the blend of these two which goes to form the body of Irish verse, and the beauty is that immortal, spiritual beauty which is beyond the beauty of earth, and the love is that which is clothed with all the romance and melancholy of the Celtic mind. Their art is not of that austere kind which requires that " beauty itself shall come in sober apparel, joy only walking temperately, sorrow without the disfigure-

ment of tears." (41) Their lives are lived out naturally. They brook no control or restraint, and are not careful to curb their passions or their emotions. And that is why there is such freedom in their verse, and such richness of colour and expression.

What other people could frame words like their words, to image the beauty of women, or yield them an equal measure of praise? Who, but one of their poets, could have written such a precious thing as this description of Etain the Fair. "Now Eochaid Feidlech, High King of Ireland, was going one time over the fair green of Bri Leith, and he saw, at the side of a well, a woman with a bright comb of gold and silver, and, she washing in a silver basin, having four golden birds on it, and little bright purple stones set in the rim of the basin. A beautiful purple cloak she had, and silver fringes to it, and a gold brooch; and she had on her a dress of green silk, with a long hood, embroidered in red gold, and wonderful clasps of gold and silver on her breasts and on her shoulder. The sunlight was falling on her, so that the gold and the green silk were shining out. Two plaits of hair she had, four locks in each plait, and a bead at the point of every lock, and the colour of her hair was like yellow flags in summer, or like red gold after it is rubbed. There she was, letting down her hair to wash it, and her arms out through the sleeve holes of her shift. Her soft hands were as white as the snow of a single night, and her eyes as blue as any

blue flower, and her lips as red as the berries of the rowan-tree, and her body as white as the foam of a wave. The bright light of the moon was in her face, the highness of pride in her eybrows, a dimple of delight in each of her cheeks, the light of wooing in her eyes, and when she walked, she had a step that that was steady and even, like the walk of a queen." (42)

We have already seen that when the Irish would sing of love, it is the fever of love and its sorrow which comes to their mind, and touches with a plaintive note the strings of their lyre. The love that for some is a quickening flame becomes for them a devouring fire, and in its passionate heat they are consumed. It is by the shipwreck of their lives they learn that Aphrodite is at once the fairest of the deities and the most cruel, and that when she is most gracious to men it is time for them to die. It may be well here to give some illustration of this, and how could one choose anything more beautiful, or more representative, than the following lyric of Mr. W. B. Yeats:—

"The quarrel of the sparrows in the eaves,
The full round moon and the star laden sky,
And the loud song of the ever-singing leaves,
Has hid away earth's old and weary cry.

And then you came with those red mournful lips,
And with you came the whole of the world's tears,
And all the sorrows of her labouring ships,
And all the trouble of her myriad years.

And now the sparrows warring in the eaves,
The curd-pale moon, the white stars in the sky,
And the loud chaunting of the unquiet leaves,
Are shaken with earth's old and weary cry."

XVIII

THE last element we can set apart for consideration in Irish poetry is that, which, perhaps of all, gives to it the greatest part of its charm. And this is its affinity with the natural world, nay more, its perfect understanding and expression of the hidden mysteries and inarticulate voices of Nature. The Celtic Peoples have never grown ashamed or forgetful of the Divine Mother from whom they sprang, and to whom, in due season, they return. True Children of Earth, their souls are filled with the softness of dawns and the splendour of sun-risings, and the glory of sun-settings. They have known, as no others have known, the peace that broods along the lonely hills, and the tenderness that is in the sacred aisles of primeval woods, where, as one of their poets says:

" the ancient mother lingers
To dip her hands in the diamond dew
And lave thy ache with cloud cool fingers
Till sorrow die from you." (48)

The sea itself flows in their veins: they are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars. (44) They have laid their hearts against the mother heart of Nature, and let them beat in unison with hers; their songs seem to be but the setting down of that inner beauty and wisdom which she has revealed to these children of hers, who have loved her with a love so deep and so enduring.

The divinity of earth, the sighing of the wind, the surge of the unresting sea, these are chief among the abiding elements of Irish poetry. And the love of the Irish for these is so strong, as to make them often look back wistfully to the time when, in the early freshness of the world, they prayed their prayers alone to the Nature Gods, and framed their litanies only for the beauty of this earth.

"Who," they sing, with a note of regret in their voices:—

> "Who is that goddess to whom men should pray,
> But her from whom their hearts have turned away?
> Out of whose virgin being they were born,
> Whose mother nature they have named in scorn,
> Calling its holy substance common clay.
>
> Yet from this so despised earth was made
> The milky whiteness of those queens, who swayed
> Their generations with a light caress,
> And from some image of whose loveliness
> The heart built up high heaven when it prayed." (45)

The Irish love of the sea and the wind is free from the gloom and terror that these cast into the souls of

their brothers away in Brittany. To the latter, the wind is that which tells of the cruelties of the Gods, the hapless fate of humankind, the ceaseless pursuit of illusions ceaselessly renewed, and, if they speak of it at all in their verse, it is with words full of vagueness, and mystery, and uneasiness :—"Ann avel a zeu deus a bell. Dén na oar piou ê ann avel." "The wind comes from very far away. We do not know who is the wind." And the sea, too, is the implacable enemy of the Bretons, and the fear of it is ever in their souls, throwing its deep shadow athwart their happier hours. It is an—

> "Ocean incarnadined with countless crime,
> Green with drowned hopes and wrecks of joyous prime;
> Salt with the myriad tears of human woes,
> Tossed with the surge and tumult of earth's throes." (46)

The Irish have overcome this feeling of terror in face of the vast elemental forces of Nature, and, though they know more keenly than other men the melancholy that comes to those that look long upon the beauty of the world, they know, too, at times, the old joy of earth, and the reckless laughter of the wind, and the gladness of the sea.

The wind that blows through them "the melancholy forgotten things of long ago," is the same wind that they hear with—

> "slender fingers
> Harping strange things among the tossing reeds,
> A lordlier music than the old blind singers
> Made of Cuchulain and his mighty deeds,
> And heroes this faint time no longer heeds." (47)

And that, again, is the same wind which, with its exultant sweep, cures them of all their heartbreak and nerves, and braces them to front the future with untroubled souls. And the sea that is

> " terrible with the unrevealed
> Burden of dim lamentful prophecies,"

is that which yields to them its sacred consolation, and that again, which as a harper, " lays hold of the shore as a lyre," rejoicing their hearts with its perfect music. " Oceanward," they sing, " Oceanward, the sea-horses sweep magnificently, champing and whirling white foam about their green flanks, and tossing on high their manes of sunlit rainbow-gold, dazzling white and multitudinous, far as sight can reach. O champing horses of my soul, toss on high your sunlit manes, your manes of rainbow-gold, dazzling white and multitudinous, for I, too, rejoice, rejoice." (48)

XIX

It is because of their absorbing love for Nature that the Irish have kept about them the old earth-magic and steeped their hearts in its spell. For them the god Pan is not dead; the natural world is

peopled with the children of the Sidhe, the hidden, wondrous folk that never die, and there come stealing upon their ears ceaselessly, far unknown cries, and whispering voices, and the faint sound of phantom battle-horns, and those wild, remote, uncertain bells, that ring out their fatal beauty, and lonely sorrow, from Falias. and Finias, and Gorias, and Murias, the four buried cities of the Irish seas.

"Once," as Mr. Yeats says, "every people in the world believed that trees were divine, and could take a human or grotesque shape, and dance among the shadows; and that deer, and ravens and foxes, and wolves and bears, and clouds and pools, almost all things under the sun and moon, and the sun and moon, were not less divine and changeable. They saw in the rainbow the still bent bow of a god thrown down in his negligence; they heard, in the thunder, the sound of his beaten water jar, or the tumult of his chariot wheels; and when a sudden flight of wild duck, or of crows, passed over their heads, they thought they were gazing at the dead hastening to their rest; while they dreamed of so great a mystery in little things, that they believed the waving of a hand, or of a sacred bough, enough to trouble far-off hearts, or hood the moon with darkness."

It is this primitive spirit that the Irish have preserved, with so little loss, from the clutch of the devouring years. Other races have stopped their

ears to the whispering of the faery folk, and grown old, and closed the doors of their souls upon whatsoever is fair and lovely. But the Irish—and, be it remembered, as their abiding praise—have held fast, through the long horror and humiliation of their history, to the unaltering agelessness which is the secret of their charm. They are a race of children —children of Aengus the Beautiful and the Ever Young—and they have all the simplicity, and wonder, and surprise that goes with youth, and with youth alone. It is because of this that they can overhear the voices of "The Twilight People," as they call them, and interpret the song of the birds, and fathom the secret of the forest ways. And it is this childlikeness, strangely blent with all the inherited sorrow of their lives, which makes it possible for them to frame such perfect verses as those with which we will close our study of the literature of the Irish:—

"It is a whisper among the hazel bushes;
It is a long, low, whispering voice that fills
With a sad music the bending and swaying rushes;
It is a heart beat deep in the quiet hills.

Twilight people, why will you still be crying,
Crying and calling to me out of the trees?
For under the quiet grass the wise are lying,
And all the strong ones are gone over the seas.

And I am old, and in my heart at your calling
Only the old dead dreams a-fluttering go;
As the wind, the forest wind, in its falling
Sets the withered leaves fluttering to and fro." (49)

XX

It is time to be making an end, or the writer will be accused of playing "the sleepy tune" of the harpers of the Sidhe, the which, if a man hear, though he try his utmost to keep awake, and though he be in the midst of battle, or following the chase, or reading in a book, yet shall he straightway be overcome with the irresistible desire for sleep. If he has not already done so, the writer is sorely inclined to cast over his readers this same spell of sleep, for then, without injury or blame, he might indulge his teeming fancy, and swell this little treatise into a mighty volume, worthy, at any rate in size, to find place with "Erin's host of books." One is loth to be drawn away from the study of a people like the Irish, for further knowledge of their nature brings with it a deeper love. And therein is the danger. For love has never acknowledged the laws of time and space, and literary affections, in particular, are apt to loose sight of the endurance of mortal readers or the stern rules of art.

It would have been pleasant to write of the folk songs, in which one may hear the very heart of the Irish people beating; and the folk tunes, whose

simple melodies fall upon one's soul like memories from another world. One would have liked, also, to tell of the three orders of the Irish Saints, of which the first glowed like the sun in the fervour of their charity, the second cast a pale radiance like the moon, and the third shone with the faint glimmering of the Aurora, which three Orders the blessed Patrick foreknew, enlightened by heavenly wisdom, when in prophetic vision he saw at first all Ireland ablaze, and afterwards only the mountains on fire, and at last only lamps lit in the valleys.

But, above all, it had been the desire of the writer to make pass before his readers something more than the shadows of those illustrious children of Erin, whose names are as everlasting lights in the long corridor of the temple of fame. There had been no better way of coming to an end than to have made a Masque of the Undying Dead—those

> "wanderers o'er Eternity
> Whose bark drives on and anchored ne'er shall be,"

no sweeter recessional than to have hymned their praise, as one unfolded in gradual beauty the pageant of their lives.

We should have seen the Tuatha De Danaan pass by us in all the splendour of their strength, among them Manannan MacLir, clad in his invulnerable mail, his jewelled helmet flashing in the sun, robed in his cloak of magic, woven from the fleeces of the

flocks of Paradise, and girt with his sword "Retaliator," which never failed to slay. Goibniu, the forger of weapons, and brewer of the ale of immortality. Morrigu, Queen of Battle, Niamh of the Golden Tresses, Queen of the land of Youth, and Lugh of the Long Hands, with his face shining with the glory of the sun. And in their train would have swept by the proud conquering Milesians, with Amergin of the White Knees at their head, weaving his Druid incantations, and singing his perfect lays. And, after them again, the Champions of the Red Branch, with Conchobar MacNessa for their chief, and with him Bricriu of the Bitter Tongue, and Conall the Victorious, and the three sons of Uisneach, Naisi, and Ainnle, and Ardan, pillars of the headlong bursting battle, and, by their side, Deirdre, the Queen of Loveliness, crowned with the white flame of wisdom, and the red flame of beauty. And a little apart from these, resplendent in his chariot, with the herolight about his head, Cuchulain—the flower of Irish Chivalry, the supreme glory of Irish Romance.

"Like a swift hound for strength, and graceful slenderness
In the first flower of his youth; the colours of his face
Fresh as the dawning day, and in his clear blue eyes
The glad undaunted light of life's unsullied morn." (50)

These again, would have passed on their way, and given place to the Fianna, and we should have looked upon Fionn, the breaker of hosts, and king of the glittering blades of war; and Osgur of dire

deeds; and Diarmuid of the dusky curling hair, the lover and beloved of women; and Caoilte, swiftest footed of men; and Conan, of Boisterous Speech; and Goll Mac Morna, the raging lion, the torch of onset, and the great of soul. And last of all, following very slowly and far behind, the sad, pathetic figure of Oisin, wrenching great sorrowful cries out of his harp for the loss of Niamh of the Golden Hair, and for the land of Youth where he may no more return, and for the departed glory of the Fianna.

It is, with Oisin, the bard:—

> "Whose ancient song
> Over the clamour of all change is heard,
> Sweet-voiced and strong." (51)

It is with him the pageant should end. It is his voice, and the harping of his harp, these alone, that should be with us at the last: his sublime elegies that should linger in our hearts after that we have taken our leave of this doomed and passing race.

A doomed and passing race! Yes, but not wholly so. The Celt has at last reached his horizon. There is no shore beyond. He knows it. This has been the burden of his song since Malvina led the blind singer to his grave by the sea. "Even the Children of Light must go down in the darkness." But this apparition of a passing race is no more than the fulfilment of a glorious resurrection before

our very eyes. For the genius of the Celtic Race stands out now with averted torch, and the light of it is a glory before the eyes, and the flame of it is blown into the hearts of the mightier, conquering people. The Celt falls, but his spirit rises in the heart and the brain of the Anglo-Celtic peoples with whom are the destinies of the generations to come." (52)

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31 This versatile scholar may very likely be an ancestor of Dr. Douglas Hyde, the famous man of letters of our own day. I am informed by the latter that his family were the De La Hydes before the time of Elizabeth.

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